

Environmental Assessment

Yukon Quest International, Ltd.

Prepared by
U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Eastern Interior Field Office
Fairbanks, Alaska

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Identifying Information:	1
1.1.1. Title, EA number, and type of project:	1
1.1.2. Location of Proposed Action:	1
1.1.3. Name and Location of Preparing Office:	1
1.1.4. Subject function code, lease, serial, or case file number:	1
1.1.5. Applicant Name:	1
1.2. Purpose and Need:	1
1.2.1. Applicant's Purpose and Need for Proposed Action	1
1.2.2. BLM's Purpose and Need	2
1.2.3. BLM Decision to be Made	2
1.3. Scoping, Public Involvement and Issues:	2
2. Proposed Action and Alternatives	3
2.1. Description of the Proposed Action:	5
2.2. Description of Alternatives Analyzed in Detail:	6
2.3. Conformance	6
3. Affected Environment:	9
4. Environmental Effects:	13
5. Tribes, Individuals, Organizations, or Agencies Consulted:	17
6. List of Preparers	21

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List of Tables

Table 5.1. List of Persons, Agencies and Organizations Consulted	19
Table 6.1. List of Preparers and Reviewers	23

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Chapter 1. Introduction

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1.1. Identifying Information:

1.1.1. Title, EA number, and type of project:

Environmental Assessment

DOI-BLM-AK-F020-2013-0008-EA

Special Recreation Permit

1.1.2. Location of Proposed Action:

The proposed action is located within the Steese National Conservation Area, Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River, Central Administration Site (T.9N, R.14E., Sec 27, Fairbanks Meridian) and Eagle Administration Site (T.1S., R.32E., Sec. 32, Fairbanks Meridian).

1.1.3. Name and Location of Preparing Office:

Lead Office: Eastern Interior Field Office - LLAKF02000

1150 University Avenue

Fairbanks, Alaska 99709-3844

1.1.4. Subject function code, lease, serial, or case file number:

2930 Special Recreation Permit, Case File Number: FF096494

1.1.5. Applicant Name:

Yukon Quest International, Ltd.

1.2. Purpose and Need:

1.2.1. Applicant's Purpose and Need for Proposed Action

The Yukon Quest International, Ltd. (Yukon Quest), conducts a competitive winter race between Fairbanks, Alaska and Whitehorse, Yukon Territory annually. The trail traverses through portions of BLM-managed lands within the Steese National Conservation Area (SNCA), Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River (WSR). The Yukon Quest is requesting a Special Recreation Permit to conduct activities associated with the race on BLM-managed lands and the use of Eagle and Central Administrative Sites for 2013-2017 (5 years).

1.2.2. BLM's Purpose and Need

The purpose for action is to determine whether or not to issue a Special Recreation Permit to the Yukon Quest for commercial and competitive use of BLM-managed lands within the SNCA, Birch Creek WSR and Eagle and Central Administrative Sites for 2013-2017 (5 years). The need for action is established under the authority of Section 302 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 and the regulations found in 43 CFR 2932. FLPMA directs the BLM to regulate the use, occupancy and development of public lands. The purpose of the regulations found in 43 CFR 2932 is to determine when a permit is required for the use of public lands for recreational purposes and to establish procedures for the orderly and timely processing of permit applications.

1.2.3. BLM Decision to be Made

The BLM will make a decision whether or not to issue the Yukon Quest a Special Recreation Permit to authorize the use of BLM-managed lands and facilities in support of the annual competitive winter race. The BLM will also determine the mitigation measures necessary to prevent undue and unnecessary degradation of the resources and to protect the natural and other values of BLM-managed lands.

1.3. Scoping, Public Involvement and Issues:

Internal scoping involved the Eastern Interior Field Office Interdisciplinary Team. The Valued Environmental Components (VEC) matrix was used to identify issues for analysis. The following components were evaluated: air quality; areas of critical environmental concern; cultural resources; environmental justice; essential fish habitat; farm lands; fire management; floodplains; hydrology; invasive, nonnative species; mineral resources; Native American religious concerns; paleontological resources; realty; land status; recreation; socioeconomic; soils; subsistence; threatened or endangered species; travel management; vegetative resources; visual resources; hazardous or solid wastes; surface or ground water quality; wetlands/riparian zones; wild and scenic rivers; wilderness characteristics; aquatic wildlife; and terrestrial wildlife. Of the components evaluated, only recreation was identified for analysis. Wild and scenic rivers was identified as having negligible impacts and was not analyzed further.

External scoping consisted of posting the proposed action on the BLM National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Register which is available online. No comments were received from the public. The proposed action has a long history and is not likely to cause any public concern or controversy. The first race was completed in 1984. BLM has permitted and monitored the race activities on BLM-managed lands annually since 1985. There have only been minor trail route changes due to overflow and river conditions. The Rosebud section of the trail has been hiked during the summer twice with litter collection activities conducted. Minimal temporary impacts were observed to the naturalness of the SNCA and Birch Creek WSR. Impacts included litter which was collected and trail markers on trees.

Chapter 2. Proposed Action and Alternatives

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2.1. Description of the Proposed Action:

The Yukon Quest International, Ltd. proposes to use existing trails through the SNCA and Birch Creek WSR for annual dog sled races (the Yukon Quest and the Yukon Quest 300). The maximum number of teams (contestants) for any year is 75. Use period is from 1 February through 20 March of each year. The trail start alternates annually between Whitehorse, Yukon Territory and Fairbanks, Alaska. Race duration is between 10 and 14 days. The length of the 1,026 mile trail traversing BLM-managed lands is approximately 34 miles or 3 percent.

The maximum number of teams allowed to run the Yukon Quest 1,000 is 50, with each team having between 6 and 14 dogs. The Yukon Quest 300 had a maximum of 25 entrants and each team may have between 6 and 12 dogs. The maximum number of teams for both races combined is 75. Average number of teams racing the Yukon Quest 1,000 is 30 and the average number of teams in the Yukon Quest 300 is 20 for a total average of 50.

Access will be by snowmobile and dog sled. All activities will take place with adequate snow cover of at least six inches. Prior to the races, the trail will be cleared of any brush and track set with snowmobiles and trail groomers. Clearing of the trail will be limited to the cutting of shrubs and trees only wide enough for the trail groomer to traverse the trail without interference. Temporary wooden lath/stakes with reflective markers will be placed at selected locations to ensure racers stay on the trails. No trail markers will be attached to any trees or other structures. Each year after the races, a cleanup sweep of the trails will be conducted on/or before 20 March to remove all trash including, dog booties, temporary trail markers and loose bedding materials. All refuse will be hauled out by the contestants and during the clean-up sweep and will be disposed of in a proper landfill. This includes any partially burned items from fires.

Contestants may take rest breaks on BLM-managed lands. Dead and down wood can be used for warming and cooking fires. All wood collection will take place at least 25 feet off the trail. Dogs will be staked-out or tied so as to minimize vegetation damage and prevent girdling of trees. All left over wood from trail clearing, fires and dog beds will be scattered around the area. All bedding materials (straw/hay) will be free of non-native seed, i.e., “weed free”.

All wildlife taken in defense of life or property will be reported to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, per Article 95 ACC 92.410 of the Alaska Game Regulations, and the BLM.

All operations shall be conducted in such a manner as not to cause damage or disturbance to any historical or archeological sites and artifacts. There will be no appropriation, excavation, injury or destruction of any prehistoric ruin or monument, or any other object of antiquity situated on lands owned or controlled by the United States. Should any site be discovered during the course of use, the Yukon Quest will avoid impacting such materials and shall immediately notify the BLM Authorized Officer.

The Yukon Quest will provide the BLM with the race dates and any changes to the operating plan by 1 January of each year and will also submit a post use report annually after each race.

BLM Central Field Station

The Yukon Quest International, Ltd. would like to use the Central Field Station grounds as a dog staging area as part of the Central, Alaska check point. Both the Yukon Quest 1,000 and the Yukon Quest 300 would use the Field Station. Use period for the staging area is from 1 February

through 20 March of each year. Dogs will be tied so as to minimize shrub vegetation damage and prevent damage of trees. No cutting of vegetation will occur at the Central Field Station.

No motorized vehicles will be parked on the site, except snowmobiles being used to set dog trails. No fueling of vehicles will occur on the grounds.

All refuse will be hauled out by the contestants and clean-up crews, and disposed of in a Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) approved landfill. This includes dog booties, litter, bedding materials and any dog excrement.

The main cabin would be used as sleeping accommodations by Yukon Quest race staff including veterinarians, officials, trail breakers and race managers. It will not be used by contestants or other non-race individuals. There will be no water poured down the drains and no water will be available on-site. The kitchen facilities will not be used and the building will be swept, vacuumed and left in a clean condition. Fuel used for heating the structure will be replaced by 20 March of each year.

BLM Eagle Field Station

The Yukon Quest International, Ltd. would like to use the Eagle Field Station in support of race operations associated with the Yukon Quest 1,000 during the month of February. The building(s) would be used by pilots, veterinarians and other race officials awaiting clearance from Customs. The Yukon Quest will allow no dogs inside unless kenneled for transit out of or in to Eagle, Alaska, nor shall any straw be allowed on site. All facilities shall be left clean and all trash generated shall be removed and properly disposed of in a Alaska DEC approved landfill. There will be no water poured down the drains and no water will be available onsite.

2.2. Description of Alternatives Analyzed in Detail:

The Proposed Action Alternative would be to issue the Yukon Quest International, Ltd. a permit to conduct competitive sled dog races on BLM-managed lands within the SNCA and on Birch Creek WSR, and the use of Central and Eagle Field Stations as described.

The No Action Alternative would result in the applicant not being issued a permit to conduct competitive dog sled races on BLM-managed lands within the SNCA and on Birch Creek WSR or the use of Central or Eagle Field Stations.

2.3. Conformance

The EA is in conformance with the .

- Birch Creek River Management Plan, December 1983 (BLM-AK-PT-83-003-1610-REP-87-080); Item 7 – Visitor Management, Action 7.3: Permits are required for all commercial river guides and outfitters operating within the river corridor.
- Resource Management Plan for the Steese National Conservation Area, February 6, 1986 (BLM-AK-PT-86-018-1610-028); Prescriptions Common to All Management Units, Recreation Management, Management Direction, Protection of important Recreation Values: Important recreational resource values that make the SNCA unique will be protected. These values include outstanding scenic vistas of high mountain terrain, primitive areas with virtually no evidence of man-made improvements, wildlife viewing opportunities, high ridge

hiking opportunities along unmarked trails, unique landforms and geologic features, hunting opportunities, and outstanding opportunities for winter use of remote backcountry through a system of primitive cabins. Special Recreation Use Permits are required for commercial uses such as commercial outfitting and guiding and commercial river trips, etc.

- Fortymile Management Framework Plan, 09/08/1980; The proposed action is in conformance with the Land Use Plan (LUP), even though is not specifically provided for, because it is clearly consistent with the following LUP objective(s): Objective Lands.1: Make lands available for intensive use and public purposes.
- Central Field Station is not covered under any land use plan.

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Chapter 3. Affected Environment:

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Recreation

The SNCA and Birch Creek WSR are largely undeveloped with emphasis on caribou habitat and water quality. Recreation resources include experiences and benefits associated with summer and winter activities in a predominately natural environment. Winter snowmobile use is open to cross-country travel except in Research Natural Areas. Winter activities including dog mushing, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, trapping and hunting, and winter camping. Based on the Benefits Based Management in the White Mountains National Recreation Area: Winter Recreation Study; February 2009 which has similar visitors and activities, winter use of these undeveloped areas provides an opportunity to test skills and abilities and learn capabilities while experiencing the sight, sound, and smells of nature in a natural landscape and experience being close to nature. Use allows for the escape of everyday responsibilities in a primitive setting, and being away from crowds of people in an open space area. Benefits include a greater connection with nature and an enhanced sense of personal freedom, as well as a heightened awareness of the natural world and human impacts and a greater protection for fish and wildlife habitat.

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Chapter 4. Environmental Effects:

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Recreation

The Proposed Action allows access for long distance competitive use of the largely undeveloped SNCA and Birch Creek WSR on a set point-to-point trail (Yukon Quest) for winter activities including dog mushing and winter camping. Access to these undeveloped areas provides an opportunity to test skills and abilities and learn capabilities while experiencing the sight, sound, and smells of nature in a natural landscape and being close to nature during winter. Indirect impacts allows access to other users such as skiers and non race dog mushing, as well as snowmobiling on a groomed trail. Use allows for the escape of everyday responsibilities in a primitive, natural setting, and being away from crowds of people in an open space area. Cumulative impacts would be negligible due to the low level of winter use of the area. Winter use includes limited state and federal hunting, some recreational snowmobile riding for site-seeing from the Chena Hot Springs area or from the Central area, winter trapping activities, and a few cross-country skiers from Upper Birch Creek Wayside to Chena Hot Springs or around the Central area. No residual impacts were identified.

The No Action Alternative would deny the use of the public lands to the Yukon Quest International, Ltd. Denial of the permit would indirectly limit access to the SNCA and Birch Creek WSR to shorter trapping trails or recreational snowmobile trails developed for hunting and pleasure riding that pose a greater risk to users due to traps adjacent to the trails, hunting activities, and the meandering temporary nature of these trails.

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Chapter 5. Tribes, Individuals, Organizations, or Agencies Consulted:

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Table 5.1. List of Persons, Agencies and Organizations Consulted

Name	Purpose & Authorities for Consultation or Coordination	Findings & Conclusions
Maria Roberts	Yukon Quest International, Ltd.	

The Proposed Action was posted on the BLM's National Environmental Policy Act Register which is available to the public online at www.blm.gov. No comments were received from the public. The Yukon Quest has occurred annually since 1985 and the Yukon Quest 300 has occurred annually since at least 2003 with very little change to the trail alignment on BLM-managed lands or permitted activities. The race is well supported by the general public and communities long the route. At this time neither race is controversial. There are no other competitive winter races within the area and no public or Tribal concerns with the permit are anticipated.

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Chapter 6. List of Preparers

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Table 6.1. List of Preparers and Reviewers

Name	Title	Responsible for the Following Section(s) of this Document
Collin Cogley	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Fire Management
Ruth Gronquist	Wildlife Biologist	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern; Farm Lands; Invasive, Nonnative Species; Subsistence; Threatened or Endangered Species; Vegetative Resources; Terrestrial Wildlife
Rebecca Hile	Physical Scientist	Hazardous or Solid Wastes
Ben Kennedy	Hydrologist	Air Quality; Floodplains; Soils; Surface or Ground Water Quality; Wetlands/Riparian Zones
Holli McClain	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Environmental Justice; Recreation; Socioeconomics; Travel Management; Visual Resources; Wild and Scenic Rivers; Wilderness Characteristics;
Robin Mills	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources; Native American Religious Concerns
Jason Post	Fisheries Biologist	Essential Fish Habitat; Aquatic Wildlife
Matt Reece	Geologist	Mineral Resources
Victor Wallace	Realty Specialist	Realty